

*In Response:*  
***Reframing “Major Country Relations” in Pursuit of  
Partnership and Accountability***

Genevieve Neilson

*Genevieve Neilson will graduate with a Master’s in International Affairs from The George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs in August 2015. Her research interests include international migration, climate change adaptation and energy policy with regional focuses on China and the South Pacific. She received her B.A. (Honors) in international relations and political science from Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. Genevieve is a 2015 Presidential Management Fellow Finalist and a board member for the Australian and New Zealand Studies Association of North America.*

Since Chinese President Hu Jintao launched the idea of creating a “new type of great-power relations,” scholars have sought to extrapolate what the concept means for the United States. Perhaps to quell the concerns of those who see China as a threat, President Xi Jinping later renamed the construct to a “new type of major country relations.” Even prior to Hu’s articulation of this concept, though, there was significant policy debate on whether the United States should engage with a rising China as a competitor or partner.

Emily Chen’s “Cooperation in Depth, Competition in Control” contributes to that debate by advancing a framework called “constructive engagement,” meant to ensure that the concept of “great-power relations” is defined in a way that benefits the United States. Through this framework, Chen finds the following areas of potential cooperation: human rights and democratization, Taiwan, and security and economic policy. By emphasizing increased dialogue in these areas, the framework provides a consistent starting point for the United States. Yet a U.S. approach to “major country relations” should understand China as a complex state that is undergoing a transformation into a responsible

stakeholder in the international order. Rather than concentrating on precluding conflict, the framework should emphasize collaboration and promote accountability between the two powers.

Skeptics believe the concept of a “new type of great-power relations” is a trap designed to give China the

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ability to establish new rules of international affairs. They argue that it allows China to select areas in which it seeks to cooperate with the United States while avoiding other issues. This view assumes that China will catch up to the

development level of the United States. For example, Andrew Erickson and Adam Liff wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that U.S. accession to China’s definition “offers ammunition for those in Beijing and beyond who promote a false narrative of the United States’ weakness and China’s inevitable rise...[it] grants China great-power status without placing any conditions on its behavior.”<sup>1</sup> Chen expands upon this criticism by arguing that Washington should define and shape the concept in a way that favors the United States. Otherwise, she writes, a commitment to China’s version of the framework could tie Washington to a lopsided cooperative agreement that might drift away from areas of U.S. interest, such as human rights and democratization.

Such arguments ignore that China is what David Shambaugh calls a “partial power.”<sup>2</sup> While China may catch up to the United States economically within the next several decades, it currently lacks the military capability, alliance networks, and soft power outreach needed to attain its aspirational status as a leader in international affairs. Beijing’s increased international economic and security leadership, as evidenced by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, demonstrate its willingness to contribute to the international architecture rather than pursue a wholly unilateral foreign policy. Yet Shambaugh recently predicted that the “endgame of Chinese communist

rule has now begun,”<sup>3</sup> identifying the frailty of the political system as a significant domestic hurdle to further expansion of Chinese global influence.

Nonetheless, the United States was put in a tenuous position by China’s slogan. If Washington accepts the concept, it may signal to regional allies in Asia that it is succumbing to Chinese influence. Total U.S. rejection of the concept would impede cooperation with Beijing, add to existing distrust, and damage U.S. interests in the region.<sup>4</sup> The United States can still accept and use the concept as a way to transform Beijing into a responsible stakeholder.

Chen rightly highlights areas of mutual mistrust, but discounts the ability of domestic rhetoric to hamper progress. Citing Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, she writes that both countries should increase the frequency and transparency of communications, as mistrust stemming from political differences and the narrowing power gap will not be removed swiftly. Indeed, the United States invites China to military exchanges such as the 2014 Rim of the Pacific exercise<sup>5</sup> and promotes people-to-people ties, as seen in the 100,000 Strong Educational Exchange Initiative.<sup>6</sup> Yet while these initiatives and the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue deepens macroeconomic cooperation and strengthens trust, U.S. officials often wield currency manipulation as a political issue<sup>7</sup> despite its relative irrelevance to U.S. businesses trading with China.<sup>8</sup> Issues that appeal to a domestic audience perpetuate mistrust and hamper higher-level progress.

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As a way of managing conflicting interests, Chen’s framework of “constructive engagement” exemplifies the current narrow scope of U.S. policymaking. First, the use of non-government organizations and Internet technology to promote American values to the Chinese public already raises suspicions within Chinese leadership. By contrast, China cannot

engage in such a campaign because it lacks similar non-government organizations; even cultural groups are considered the Chinese Communist Party propaganda vehicles. U.S.-China public-private cooperation supporting Internet governance would be more useful. Second, Washington remains unable to determine the direction of China-Taiwan relations and thus endorses the status quo. Lastly, Chen overstates the negative consequences of economic interdependence; many U.S. companies operating in China take advantage of cheap labor while profiting from local demand, which does not increase U.S. vulnerability. For the author, in some areas the United States and China should basically agree to disagree.

The framework also forgoes an adequate discussion of how the United States can support China as a “responsible international stakeholder.” Chen offers examples of crises in Sudan, North Korea, and Iran as areas ripe for security cooperation. Yet China stood in the way of United Nations action against Syria over the past several years, including by vetoing a draft resolution to refer the crisis to the International Criminal Court (ICC). While Washington heavily criticized Beijing and Moscow for the veto, the United States is not a member of the ICC and only agreed to support the resolution after assurances that Israel would not also be referred to the ICC.<sup>9</sup>

Other international arenas offer more promise. Cooperation related to climate change, sustainable growth, and finance in the post-2015 development agenda are areas which China has more recently taken leadership positions and can continue to serve U.S. interests. The article might have benefited from a brief historical discussion of the concept of “conengagement,” which suggests that the United States should both engage with China and hedge against it.<sup>10</sup> Congagement is similar to the liberal realism approach supported by the author, which “embraces China as a responsible stakeholder, but hedges against possible hostility by maintaining close relations with Japan, India, and other countries in the region.”<sup>11</sup>

The article also falls short in addressing the recent change in terminology to “new type of major country relations” and President Obama’s subsequent silence on the topic. In November 2014, President Xi articulated new terminology and outlined priority areas for the relationship that place more responsibility on Beijing to become an active stakeholder in the international order.<sup>12</sup> Yet Xi remained stalwart on his requirement that each side “not act against each other’s core interests.” While the United States never vacated the Pacific, its “rebalancing” to the region was a direct response to China’s increased international influence and assertiveness. Washington can still nurture China’s leadership ambitions and support China as a responsible stakeholder. The concept initiated by China is not an act of *caution* to avoid confrontation, as the author posits, but it is a *proactive* method for China to equalize itself with the United States and create a framework for accountability. For the United States, pursuing a “new type of major country relations” with China can be a constructive way to challenge traditional thinking by envisioning Beijing as a true partner.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Erickson and Adam Liff, “Not-So-Empty Talk: The Danger of China’s ‘New Type of Great-Power Relations’ Slogan,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142178/andrew-s-erickson-and-adam-p-liff/not-so-empty-talk>

<sup>2</sup> David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> David Shambaugh, “The Coming Chinese Crackup,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-chinese-crack-up-1425659198>

<sup>4</sup> Dingding Chen, “Defining a ‘New Type of Major Power Relations,’” *Diplomat*, November 8, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/defining-a-new-type-of-major-power-relations>

<sup>5</sup> Phil Stewart, “China to Attend Major U.S.-hosted naval exercises, but role limited” *Reuters*, March 22, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/22/us-usa-china-drill-idUSBRE92L18A20130322>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, “100,000 Strong Educational Exchange Initiatives,” <http://www.state.gov/100k>

<sup>7</sup> “Debate over China’s currency manipulation part of international trade pact,” *South China Morning Post*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1733705/debate-over-chinas-currency-manipulation-part-international-trade-debate>

<sup>8</sup> The U.S.-China Business Council, USCBC 2014 China Business Environment Survey Results, “Growth Continues Amidst Rising Competition, Policy Uncertainty,” 2014, [https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/USCBC%202014%20China%20Business%20Environment%20Survey%20Results%20%28English%29\\_0.pdf](https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/USCBC%202014%20China%20Business%20Environment%20Survey%20Results%20%28English%29_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ian Black, “Russia and China Veto UN Move to Refer Syria to International Criminal Court,” *Guardian*, May 22, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/22/russia-china-veto-un-draft-resolution-refer-syria-international-criminal-court>

<sup>10</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, “Congage China,” RAND, Project Air Force Issue Paper, 1999, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/issue\\_papers/2006/IP187.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/issue_papers/2006/IP187.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Toward A Liberal Realist Foreign Policy: A Memo for the Next President,” *Harvard Magazine*, March/April/2008, <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/03/toward-a-liberal-realist.html>

<sup>12</sup> Xinhua News Agency, “China Marks Six Priorities for New Type of Major-Country Relations with U.S.” *Beijing Review*, November 13, 2014, [http://www.bjreview.com/se/txt/2014-11/13/content\\_652603.htm](http://www.bjreview.com/se/txt/2014-11/13/content_652603.htm)